

In Conversation: Gordon Smith

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Economic insecurity, polluted environments, the transfiguring power of global media, brooding conflicts of tribe and territory: all confound the capacity of even the most powerful state to govern alone, even on its own territory. For all the opportunities that globalization promises, it raises urgent questions of governance. Can states any longer govern? Can globalization be democratized?

[Altered States: Globalization, Sovereignty, and Governance](#) provides practical recommendations for improved governance and for strengthening and reforming the United Nations. The authors examine whether sovereignty itself is an impediment or a requirement to security and prosperity. And, in three urgent areas — preventing deadly conflict, providing opportunities for the young, and managing climate change — they advance plans of action by which states, with others in the global community, can govern successfully in the future. *IDRC Reports Online* recently interviewed co-author Gordon Smith about *Altered States*.

- [Purpose of book](#)
- [Key issues](#)
- [Social spending levels](#)
- [UN reform](#)
- [Managing climate change](#)
- [The Authors](#)
- [The Book](#)

Why did you write this book? What are you hoping to accomplish?

The United Nations Secretary General attaches a great deal of importance to the Millennium Summit of the UN that will take place in New York this September. He wants to stimulate a debate around the world on what kind of better governance we need to manage our increasing interdependence in the world, and what all that means for the UN. The United Nations Foundation, really on the request of the Secretary General, commissioned Moises Naim and I to write this report precisely to try to stimulate that kind of debate.

Who is your intended audience?

We certainly hope that people at senior levels of government will read *Altered States*. We also hope that opinion leaders everywhere will read it. My own judgement is that if we are really going to get better global governance, a stronger and more effective UN, that it will ultimately come because of pressure from people outside the system on those inside. So the readership we're looking for certainly goes beyond government to people in civil society and in the private sector who are interested in how we are going to manage our increased interdependence in this world.

You have focused on three issues in *Altered States*: preventing deadly conflicts, providing opportunities for youth, and managing climate change. Why these three?

Different people would have different lists. I think these are all areas of critical importance. First, preventing deadly conflict is pretty obvious. Even with the end of the Cold War — or maybe some would argue especially with the end of the Cold War — deadly conflict has far from disappeared. The issue of deadly conflict from the intra-state level on up to the weapons of mass destruction still remains a real threat.

Climate change to me is an absolutely critical issue. To my mind, the clean development mechanism (a key element of the Kyoto protocol) is of key importance because it allows developing countries to participate in the solution. It also has some real benefits for them in terms of sustainable development, improving air quality, getting more investment, and getting technology transferred. Climate change is not just a global issue — one among many — but is one of critical importance. And it will be apparent to our children and their children over this century so we'd better be seen to be doing something about it.

The youth question is again something that people are conscious of but don't focus on sufficiently. [Our world will have] one-third more people in 25 years, most of them in the poorest countries of the world and many of them living in the already overcrowded cities of the South. If we fail to solve these problems in the South, people in wealthy countries like Canada are going to be living in a lot less stable world.

I think these are all major global challenges and they're illustrative of the kind of challenges that require global cooperation to try to make a real dent in their resolution.

You recommend spending more on health and education to provide better opportunities for youth, especially in poorer countries. Is there any support for this idea in Northern countries where many governments are cutting their own spending on health and education?

I don't think these things happen overnight. I think the more people talk about them the more attitudes change. Attitudes change slowly, they change over time. We still, in fact, spend fairly significant amounts on both health and education. Some people would argue that we don't spend our money well, rather than we don't spend enough. It doesn't take too much to get people realize that without health you certainly don't have much quality of life and without education you don't have much opportunity to better yourself.

Education is changing as a consequence of information technology. What you can do with schoolnets at the pre-university level and distance learning at the university level may well change the economics of education and not just the delivery of the product.

In the area of health, my experience is that government leaders understand fully well that they can't protect themselves against infectious diseases simply by building walls around their countries. In fact, dealing with health problems in the middle of Africa is the first line of defense against health problems arriving in your own country.

That is a theme that runs through this book. You can make a strong moral and ethical case for doing more for the poor and dispossessed of this world. But if that [argument] doesn't [sway] you, just think in terms of your own long term self interest and it takes you to much the same conclusion.

One of your key proposals for UN reform to prevent deadly conflict involves curtailing the veto powers of the permanent members of the Security Council without changing the charter. Can you elaborate?

It would not involve directly challenging the veto because the five countries that have it aren't going to give it up. What we're trying to do is to find a way to discourage a veto against the will of the majority in the General Assembly, in cases where the international community believes that there has to be a humanitarian intervention because of a major violation of human rights. What the Secretary General could do is to ask experts to do a finding. But rather than being simply reported to the Security Council, that finding would actually go the General Assembly for an advisory vote. If 150 countries accepted the analysis and 15 were against, it would make it much more difficult for a country on the Security Council to cast its veto against the strong international will. It wouldn't make it impossible, it would just make it more difficult.

Managing climate change is the third major issue you address in *Altered States*. Much of what you recommend is contained in the protocol signed in Kyoto but not yet acted upon by many governments.

Here, the role of the United States is key. The US has made clear that it will only ratify the protocol if a significant number of countries in the South are also engaged in the process of managing their own emissions. This comes back to the clean development mechanism because it's the way to get countries like China and India [on board] who need substantial growth, and growth tends to consume energy, and energy can be cheaply provided by burning fossil fuels. The clean development mechanism is a way of weaning people from that dependence on fossil fuels, getting the major countries of the South engaged in the process and consequently increasing the possibilities that the Kyoto protocol will be ratified.

The Authors

Gordon Smith is Director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria and a Senior Fellow in the Liu Centre at the University of British Columbia, Canada. He is Chairman of the Board of Governors of Canada's International Development Research Centre and the Canadian Institute for Climate Studies, and directs the Canadian Global Change Program.

Moisés Naím is the Editor of Foreign Policy magazine. He has written extensively on the political economy of international trade and investment, multilateral organizations, economic reforms, and on globalization. Dr Naím served as Venezuela's Minister of Trade and Industry and played a central role in the initial launching of major economic reforms in 1989. Between 1992 and 1996, he was Director of the Projects on Economic Reforms and on Latin America at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC.

The Book

[Altered States: Globalization, Sovereignty, and Governance](#)

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